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THE ETHICAL BASIS OF METAPHYSICS.*

I SUPPOSE that nearly every one has at one time or other been struck with Matthew Arnold's famous phrase that "Conduct is three-fourths of Life," and has wondered why he left it to be imagined whether the remaining fourth was made up of misconduct or something else. And no doubt you must have wondered also how the impressive precision of his formula was arrived at. By what experiments did this gifted author manage to surpass experimental psychology in subtlety and exactitude and establish that precisely 75 per cent. of life was composed of conduct? But I fear that, as their record has not been preserved, so scientific a genesis of Arnold's dictum will hardly be credited. And so, in the absence of more definite information, we are forced to speculate, and I will hazard an explanation more consonant, perhaps, with Arnold's mode of thought.

Let me conjecture, therefore, that, contemplating on the one hand the philistine's inarticulate belief that conduct is the one thing that really matters, and on the other the mystic's profound contempt for action, he splits the difference between all and nothing. But this would only make conduct one-half of life; so the extra quarter was added just to mark Arnold's patronizing sympathy with the feelings of the ordinary man.

But Matthew Arnold was not a philosopher, and his procedure, however it was motivated, is not likely to satisfy the philosophic mind. The philosopher's imperious logic does not deal in quarters: it is prone to argue *aut Cæsar aut nullus*; if conduct be not the whole life, it is naught. And latterly the second alternative seems to have grown philosophically almost inevitable. For, under the auspices of the Hegelizing "idealists," Philosophy has uplifted herself once more to a metaphysical contemplation of the Absolute, of the unique Whole which includes and transcends all things. Now whether this conception has any value for metaphysics is a moot point, on which I

*An address delivered to the West London Ethical Society on February 15th, 1903.

have elsewhere expressed a decided opinion; but there can hardly be a pretence of denying that it is the death of morals. For the ideal of the Absolute Whole cannot be rendered compatible with the antithetical valuations which form the vital atmosphere of human agents. They are partial appreciations, which vanish from the standpoint of the Whole. Without the distinctions of good and evil, right and wrong, pleasure and pain, self and others, then and now, progress and decay, human life would be dissolved into the phantom flow of an unmeaning *mirage*. But in the Absolute all moral distinctions must, like all others, be swallowed up and disappear. The All is raised above all ethical valuation and moral criticism: it is "beyond Good and Evil"; it is timelessly perfect, and therefore incapable of improvement. It transcends all our antitheses, because it includes them. And so to the metaphysician it seems an easy task to compose the perfection of the whole out of the imperfections of its parts: he has merely to declare that the point of view of human action, that of ethics, is not and can not be final. It is an illusion which has grown transparent to the sage. And so, in proportion as his insight into absolute reality grows clearer, his interest in ethics wanes.

It must be confessed moreover that metaphysicians no longer shrink from this avowal. The typical leader of this philosophic fashion, Mr. F. H. Bradley, never attempts to conceal his contempt for ethical considerations, nor omits a sneer at the pretensions of practice to be heard in the High Court of Metaphysics. "Make the moral point of view absolute," he cries,* "and then realize your position. You have become not merely irrational but you have also broken with every considerable religion."

And this is how he dismisses the appeal to practice,† "But if so, what, I may be asked, is the result in practice? That I reply at once, is not my business"; it is merely a "hurtful ‡

*"Appearance and Reality," p. 500-1.

†Ibid., p. 450.

‡But does not this "*hurtful*" reaffirm the ethical valuation which Mr. Bradley is trying to exclude?

prejudice" if "irrelevant appeals to practical results are allowed to make themselves heard."

Altogether I can conceive nothing more pulverizing to ethical aspiration than chapter 25 of Mr. Bradley's "Appearance and Reality." *

And the worst of it all is that this whole treatment of ethics follows logically and legitimately from the general method of philosophizing which conducts to the metaphysical assumption of the Absolute.

Fortunately, however, there appears to be a natural tendency when the consequences of a point of view have been stated without reserve, and become plain to the meanest intelligence, to turn round and try something fresh. By becoming openly immoralist, metaphysic has created a demand for its moral reformation. And so, quite recently there has become noticeable a movement in a diametrically opposite direction, which repudiates the assumptions and reverses the conclusions of the metaphysical criticism of ethics which we have been considering. Instead of regarding contemplation of the Absolute as the highest form of human activity, it sets it aside as trivial and unmeaning, and puts purposeful action above purposeless speculation. Instead of supposing that Action is one thing and Thought something alien and other, and that there is not, therefore, any reason to anticipate that the pure contemplations of the latter will in any way relate to or sanction the principles which guide the former, it treats Thought as a mode of conduct, as an integral part of active life. Instead of regarding practical results as irrelevant, it makes Practical Value an essential determinant of theoretic truth. And so far from admitting the claim to independence of an irresponsible intelligence, it regards knowledge as derivative from conduct and as involving distinctively moral qualities and responsibilities in a

*If in any one's mind any lingering doubts have survived as to the purport of this philosophic teaching, he has only to turn to the ingenious but somewhat flippant and prolix exposition of the same doctrine in Mr. A. E. Taylor's "*Problem of Conduct*." To Mr. Taylor the real problem of Conduct would appear to be why any one should continue to hanker after so manifest an absurdity as a rule of conduct.

perfectly definite and traceable way. In short, instead of being reduced to the nothingness of an illusion, Conduct is re-instated as the all-controlling influence in every department of life.

Now, I cannot but believe that all effective ethical effort ultimately needs a definite basis of assumptions concerning the nature of life as a whole, and it is because I am convinced that this new method of philosophizing will supply such a basis in an almost perfect way, that I am addressing you to-day as its earnest advocate. If I am asked for its name, I can only say that it has been called *Pragmatism* by the chief author of its importance, Professor William James, whose recent book, "The Varieties of Religious Experience." I dare say many of the readers of this JOURNAL have been enjoying. But the name in this case does even less than usual to explain the meaning, and as the nature of Pragmatism has been greatly misunderstood, and even writers of intelligence and repute have conspicuously failed to grasp it, I must try to put it in a clearer light.

And perhaps I shall best begin by mentioning a few of the ways in which Pragmatism may be reached, before telling you how it should in my opinion be defined. For a considerable prejudice against it has arisen in some minds by reason of the method by which Professor James has approached it.

Professor James first unequivocally advanced the pragmatist doctrine in connection with what he calls the "Will to believe".* Now this Will to believe was put forward as an intellectual right (in certain cases) to decide between alternative views, each of which seemed to make a legitimate appeal to our nature, by other than purely intellectual considerations, viz. their emotional interest and practical value. Although Professor James laid down a number of conditions limiting the

*He had, however, laid the foundation of his doctrine as long ago as 1879 in an article in *Mind*. And in some form or other the recognition of the *thing*, if not of the name, runs through the whole history of thought. Indeed it would be strange if it had been otherwise, seeing that, as we contend, the actual procedure of the human mind has always been (unconsciously) pragmatist.

applicability of his Will-to-believe, the chief of which was the willingness to take the risks involved and to abide by the results of subsequent experience, it was not perhaps altogether astonishing that his doctrine should be decried as rank irrationalism.

Irrationalism seemed a familiar and convenient label for the new doctrine. For irrationalism is a permanent or continually recrudescent phenomenon of the moral consciousness, the persistent vogue of which it has always been hard to explain. It is ably and brilliantly exemplified at the present day by Mr. Balfour's "Foundations of Belief," and, in an extreme and less defensible form, by Mr. Benjamin Kidd. And if, instead of denouncing it, we try to understand it, we shall not find that it is entirely absurd. At bottom indeed it indicates little more than a defect in the current rationalism, and a protest against the rationalistic blindness towards the non-intellectual factors in the foundation of beliefs. And Common Sense has always shown a certain sympathy with all such protests against the pretensions of what is called the pure intellect to dictate to man's whole complex nature. It has always felt that there are "reasons of the heart of which the head knows nothing," postulates of a faith that surpasses mere understanding, and that these possess a higher rationality which a narrow intellectualism has failed to comprehend.

Now if one had to choose between Irrationalism and Intellectualism, there would be no doubt that the former would have to be preferred. It is a less violent departure from our actual behavior, a less grotesque caricature of our actual procedure. Like Common Sense, therefore, Pragmatism sympathizes with Irrationalism in its blind revolt against the trammels of a pedantic Intellectualism. But Pragmatism does more; it not only sympathizes, it explains. It vindicates the rationality of Irrationalism, without becoming itself irrational; it restrains the extravagance of Intellectualism, without losing faith in the intellect. And it achieves this by instituting a fundamental analysis of the common root both of the reason and of the emotional revulsion against its pride. By showing the "pure" reason to be a pure figment, and a psychological impossibility, and the

real structure of the actual reason to be essentially pragmatical, and permeated through and through with acts of faith, desires to know and wills to believe, to disbelieve and to make believe, it renders possible, nay unavoidable, a reconciliation between a reason which is humanized and a faith which is rationalized in the very process which shows their antithesis to be an error.

That, however, Pragmatism should have begun by intervening in the ancient controversy between Reason and Faith was something of an accident. In itself it might equally well have been arrived at by way of a moral revolt from the unfruitful logic-chopping and aimless quibbling which is often held to be the sum total of philosophy.

Or again it might be reached, most instructively, by a critical consideration of many historic views, notably those of Kant and Lotze,* and of the unsolved problems which they leave on our hands. Or, once more, by observing the actual procedure of the various sciences and their motives for establishing and maintaining the "truth" of their various propositions, we may come to realize that what works in practice is what in actual knowing we accept as "true."

But to me personally the straightest road to Pragmatism is one which the extremest prejudice can scarce suspect of truckling to the encroachments of theology. Instead of saying like Professor James, "so all-important is it to secure the right action that (in cases of real intellectual alternatives) it is lawful for us to adopt the belief most congenial with our spiritual needs and to try whether our faith will not make it come true," I should rather say "the traditional notion of beliefs determined by pure reason alone is wholly incredible. For how can there be such a thing as 'pure' reason? How, that is, can we so separate our intellectual function from the whole complex of our activities, that it can operate in real independence of practical considerations? I cannot but conceive the reason as being, like the rest of our equipment, a weapon in the struggle for ex-

*Or, as Professor James suggested, and as Prof. A. W. Moore has actually done in the case of Locke (see his "Functional versus the Representational theory of Knowledge"), by a critical examination of the English philosophers.

istence and a means of achieving adaptation. It must follow that the practical use, which has developed it, must have stamped itself upon its inmost structure, even if it has not moulded it out of pre-rational instincts. In short, a reason which has not practical value for the purposes of life is a monstrosity, a morbid aberration or failure of adaptation, which natural selection must sooner or later wipe away."

It is in some such way that I should prefer to pave the way for an appreciation of what we mean by Pragmatism. Hence I may now venture to define it as the thorough recognition that the purposive character of mental life generally must influence and pervade also our most remotely cognitive activities.*

In other words, it is a conscious application to the theory of life of a teleological psychology which makes the problems of logic and metaphysics appear in a new light, and gives decisive weight to the conceptions of Purpose and End. Or again, it is a systematic protest against the practice of ignoring in our theories of Thought and Reality the purposiveness of all our actual thinking, and the relation of all our actual realities to the ends of our practical life. It is an assertion of the sway of human valuations over every region of our experience, and a denial that such valuation can validly be eliminated from the contemplation of any reality we know.

And inasmuch as such teleological valuation is also the

*This is wider, and I think more fundamental, than any of the definitions in Baldwin's "Dictionary of Philosophy," (II p. 321-2) for the reason that the logical development of pragmatist method in my essay on *Axioms as Postulates* came out (in "*Personal Idealism*") too recently to be available for the purposes of the "Dictionary." I think, however, that intrinsically also neither Peirce's, nor James', nor Baldwin's accounts are quite adequate. In Peirce's sense, that a conception is to be tested by its practical effects, the principle is comparatively unimportant, and, as he says, somewhat a matter of youthful buoyancy. James' definition, that the whole meaning of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, does not emphasize the essential priority of action to thought, and does not correlate it with his own "will to believe." Baldwin tries to confine it to the genetic sphere and to deny that it yields a philosophy of reality. But he fails to explain how he can get at reality without knowing it, and how our estimations of what "truth" is can disregard and become independent of our modes of establishing it.

special sphere of ethical inquiry, Pragmatism may be said to assign metaphysical validity to the typical method of ethics. At a blow it awards to the ethical conception of *Good* supreme authority over the logical conception of *True* and the metaphysical conception of *Real*. The Good becomes a determinant both of the True and of the Real. For from the pursuit of the latter we may never eliminate the reference to the former. Our apprehension of the *Real*, our comprehension of the *True*, is always effected by beings who are aiming at the attainment of some *Good*, and it seems a palpable absurdity to deny that this fact makes a stupendous difference.

I should confidently claim, therefore, that by Pragmatism a further step has been taken in the analysis of our experience which amounts to an important advance in that self-knowledge on which our knowledge of the world depends. Indeed this advance seems to me to be of a magnitude comparable with, and no less momentous than, that which gave to the *epistemological* question priority over the *ontological*.

It is generally recognized as the capital achievement of modern philosophy to have perceived that a solution of the ontological question—*What is Reality?*—is not possible until it has been decided how Reality can come within our ken. Before there can be a real for us at all, the Real must be *knowable*, and the notion of an unknowable reality is useless, because it abolishes itself. The true formulation therefore of the ultimate question of metaphysics must become—*What can I know as real?* And thus the effect of what Kant called the Copernican revolution in philosophy is that ontology, the theory of Reality, comes to be conditioned by epistemology, the theory of our knowledge.

But this truth is incomplete until we realize all that is involved in the knowledge being *ours* and recognize the real nature of our knowing. Our knowing is not the mechanical operation of a passionless "pure" intellect, which

"Grinds out Good and grinds out Ill,
And has no purpose, heart or will."

Pure intellection is not a fact in nature; it is a logical fiction which will not really answer even for the purposes of technical

logic. In reality our knowing is driven and guided at every step by our subjective interests and preferences, our desires, our needs and our ends. These form the motive powers also of our intellectual life.

Now what is the bearing of this fact on the traditional dogma of an absolute truth and ultimate reality existing for themselves apart from human agency? It would utterly debar us from the cognition of "Reality as it is in itself and apart from our interests" if such a thing there were.

For our interests impose the conditions under which alone Reality can be revealed. Only such aspects of Reality can be revealed as are not merely knowable but as are objects of an actual desire, and consequent attempt, to know. All other realities or aspects of Reality, which there is no attempt to know, necessarily remain unknown, and for us unreal, because there is no one to look for them. Reality, therefore, and the knowledge thereof, essentially presuppose a definitely directed effort to know. And, like other efforts, this effort is purposive; it is necessarily inspired by the conception of some good at which it aims. Neither the question of *Fact*, therefore, nor the question of *Knowledge* can be raised without raising also the question of *Value*. Our "Facts" when analyzed turn out to be "Values," and the conception of "Value" therefore becomes more ultimate than that of "Fact." Our valuations thus pervade our whole experience, and affect whatever "fact," whatever "knowledge" we consent to recognize. If then there is no *knowing* without *valuing*, if knowledge is a form of *Value*, or, in other words, a factor in a Good, Lotze's anticipation* has been fully realized, and the foundations of metaphysics have actually been found to lie in ethics.

In this way the ultimate question for philosophy becomes—What is Reality *for one aiming at knowing what?* "Real" means, real for what *purpose?* to what *end?* in what *use?* And the answer always comes in terms of the will to know which puts the question. This at once yields a simple and beautiful explanation of the different accounts of Reality which are

*"Metaphysics" (Eng. Tr.) ii p. 319.

given in the various sciences and philosophies. The purpose of the questions being different, so is their purport, and so must be the answers. For the direction of our effort, itself determined by our desires and will to know, enters as a necessary and ineradicable factor into whatever revelation of Reality we can attain. The response to our questions is always affected by their *character*, and *that* is in our power. For the initiative throughout is ours. It is for us to consult the oracle of Nature or to refrain; it is for us to formulate our demands and to put our questions. If we question amiss, Nature will not respond, and we must try again. But we can never be entitled to assume either that our action makes no difference or that nature contains no answer to a question we have never thought to put.

It is no exaggeration therefore to contend, with Plato, that in a way the Good, meaning thereby the conception of a final systematization of our purposes, is the supreme controlling power in our whole experience, and that in abstraction from it neither the True nor the Real can exist. For whatever forms of the latter we may have discovered, some purposive activity, some conception of a good to be attained, was involved as a condition of the discovery. If there had been no activity on our part, or if that activity had been directed to other ends than it was, there could not have been discovery, or *that* discovery.

We must discard, therefore, the notion that in the constitution of the world we count for nothing, that it matters not what we do, because Reality is what it is, whatever we may do. It is true on the contrary that our action is essential and indispensable, that to some extent the world (our world) is of our making and that without us nothing is made that is made. To what extent and in what directions the world is plastic and to be moulded by our action we do not yet know. We can find out only by trying: but we know enough for Pragmatism to transfigure the aspect of existence for us.

It frees us in the first place from what constitutes perhaps the worst and most paralyzing horror of the naturalistic view of life, the nightmare of an *indifferent* universe. For it proves that at any rate Nature cannot be indifferent to us and to our

doings. It may be hostile, and something to be fought with all our might; it may be unsuspectedly friendly, and something to be co-operated with with our whole heart; it *must* respond in varying ways to our various efforts.

Now inasmuch as we are most familiar with such varying responsiveness in our personal relations with others, it is I think natural, though not perhaps necessary, that the pragmatist will tend to put a personal interpretation upon his transactions with Nature and any agency he may conceive to underlie it. Still even ordinary language is aware that things behave differently according as you "treat" them, that *e. g.*, *treated* with fire sugar burns, while *treated* with water it dissolves. Thus in the last resort the anthropomorphism of our whole treatment of experience is unavoidable and obvious; and however much he wills to disbelieve it the philosopher must finally confess that to escape anthropomorphism he would have to escape from self. And further, seeing that ethics is the science of our relations with other persons, *i. e.* with our environment *qua* personal, this ultimateness of the personal construction we put upon our experience must increase the importance of the ethical attitude towards it. In other words our metaphysics must be in any case *quasi-ethical*.

It may fairly be anticipated, secondly, that Pragmatism will prove a great tonic to re-invigorate a grievously depressed humanity. It sweeps away entirely the stock excuse for fatalism and despair. It proves that human action is always a perceptible, and never a negligible, factor in the ordering of nature, and shows cause for the belief that the disparity between our powers and the forces of nature, great as it is, does not amount to incommensurability. And it denies that any of the great questions of human concern have been irrevocably answered against us. For most of them have not even been asked in the pragmatist manner, and in no case has there been that systematic and clear-sighted endeavor which extorts an answer from reluctant nature. In short, no doctrine better calculated to stir us to activity or more potent to sustain our efforts has ever issued from the philosophic study.

It is true that to gain these hopes we must make bold to take

some risks. If our action is a real factor in the course of events, it is impossible to exclude the contingency that if we act wrongly it may be an influence for ill. To the chance of salvation there must correspond a risk of damnation. We select the conditions under which reality shall appear to us, but this very selection selects us, and if we cannot contrive to reach a harmony in our intercourse with the real, we perish.

But to many this very element of danger will but add to the zest of life. For it cannot but appear by far more interesting than the weary grinding out of a predetermined course of things which issues in meaningless monotony from the unalterable nature of the All. And the infinite boredom with which this conception of the course of nature would afflict us, must be commingled with an equal measure of disgust when we realize that on this same theory the chief ethical issues are eternally and inexorably decided against us. Loyal co-operation and Promethean revolt grow equally unmeaning. For man can never have a ground for action against the Absolute. It is eternally and inherently and irredeemably perfect, and so leaves no ground for the hope that the "appearances" which make up our world may somehow be remoulded into conformity with our ideals. As they cannot now impair the inscrutable perfection of the Whole, they need not ever alter to pander to a criticism woven out of the delusive dreams of us poor creatures of illusion.

It is a clear gain, therefore, when Pragmatism holds out to us a prospect of a world that can become better, and even has a distant chance of becoming perfect, in a sense which we are able to appreciate. The only thing that could be preferred to this would be a universe whose perfection could not only be metaphysically deduced, but actually experienced: but such a one our universe emphatically is *not*.

Hence the indetermination which, as Professor James has urged * Pragmatism seems to introduce into our conception of the world is in the main an advantage. It brings out a connection with the ethical conception of Freedom and the old

*"Will to Believe." p. ix.

problems involved in it, which I cannot here consider fully. But I need only say this, that no indetermination can be of the slightest ethical value which does not vindicate and emphasize our moral responsibility.

And this brings me to the last point I wish to make, viz., the stimulus to our feeling of moral responsibility which must accrue from the doctrine of Pragmatism. It contains such a stimulus, alike in its denial of a mechanical determination of the world which is involved in its partial determination by our action, and in its admission that by wrong action we may evoke a hostile response, and so provoke our ruin. But in addition it must be pointed out that if every cognition, however theoretical, have practical value, it is potentially a moral act. We may incur indeed the gravest responsibilities in selecting the aims of our cognitive activities. We may become not merely wise or foolish but also good or bad by willing to know the good or the bad; nay our very will to know may so alter the conditions as to evoke a response congenial with its character.

It is a law of our nature that what we seek that we shall, in some measure, find. And so, like a rainbow, Life glitters in all the colors; like a rainbow also it adjusts itself to every beholder. To the dayflies of fashion life seems ephemeral; to the seeker after permanence, it strikes its roots into eternity. To the empty, it is a yawning chasm of inanity; to the full, it is a source of boundless interest. To the indolent, it is a call to despairing resignation; to the strenuous, a stimulus to dauntless energy. To the serious, it is fraught with infinite significance; to the flippant, it is all a somewhat sorry jest. To the melancholic, each hope is strangled in its birth; to the sanguine, two hopes spring from every grave of one. To the optimistic, life is a joy ineffable; to the pessimistic, the futile agony of an atrocious and unending struggle. To love it seems that in the end all must be love; to hate and envy it becomes a hell. The cosmic order, which to one displays the unswerving rigor of a self-sufficient mechanism, grows explicable to another only by the direct guidance of the hand of God. To those of little faith the heavens are dumb; to the faithful, they disclose the splendors of a beatific vision.

And so each sees Life as what he has it in him to perceive, and variously transfigures what, without his vision, were an unseen void. But all are not equally clearsighted, and which sees best, time and trial must establish. We can but stake our little lives upon the ventures of our faith. And, willing or unwilling, that we do and must.

And now in conclusion let me avow that after professing to discuss the relations of Philosophy and Life, I must seem to have allotted an undue share of my time to the former, and to have done little more than adumbrate the practical consequences of my philosophy. In extenuation I must urge that the stream of Truth which waters the fertile fields of Conduct has its sources in the remote and lonely uplands, *inter apices philosophiæ*, where the cloud-capped crags and slowly grinding glaciers of metaphysics soar into an air too chill and rare for our abiding habitation, but keenly bracing to the strength of an audacious climber. Here lie our watersheds; hither lead the passes to the realms unknown; hence part our ways, and here it is that we must draw the frontier lines of Right and Wrong. And moreover, I believe that in the depths of every soul there lurks a metaphysic aspiration to these heights, a craving to behold the varied patterns that compose life's whole spread out in their connection. With the right guides such ascents are safe, and even though at first twinges of mountain-sickness may befall us, yet in the end we shall return refreshed from our excursion and strengthened to endure the drudgery and common-place that are our daily portion.

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